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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: IMEDI TELEVISION RECOGNIZES THE CHANGED
ENVIRONMENT AND CHANGES WITH THE TIMES

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Imedi television - once the voice of the opposition in Georgia - has resumed broadcasting, but currently only broadcasts entertainment programming. Emboff met with station general manager and director of programming on June 10, 2008 to discuss when the station would restart news broadcasts, the recent management changes at Imedi Radio, their relations with Joseph Kay (the new owner of Imedi), and to get their assessment of recent political and journalistic developments in the country. In their view there is a new reality in Georgia: the days of widespread, serious opposition to the government are over, although some members of the opposition have not realized this fact. Imedi is prepared to work in this new environment. Even in their limited current role, Imedi is already thriving and expects to continue to do well, while recognizing their new limitations. End summary.

"We still have not been paid"

¶2. (C) Emboff met with Bidzina Baratashvili, Imedi's general manager, and Davit Gogichaishvili, Imedi's new programming manager (a Muskie program alumnus, who also runs an independant production company) on June 10, 2008. When asked about recent press reports that Imedi could begin broadcasting news within the week, they replied that they have not been able to completely repair the damage caused in the November 7, 2007 raid on Imedi by Ministry of Interior forces because the government has not yet paid for the damages caused in the raid. During negotiations with NewsCorp Europe executives and the government in late November, before Imedi briefly reopened, the government agreed to replace damaged equipment, but there was no detailed settlement, just an agreement to settle the claims. Now NewsCorp is no longer involved in the station, and there is a new owner (former owner Badri Patarkatsishvili died from a February 14, 2008 heart attack in his London home). Imedi management is not certain when they will be paid for the damages.

¶3. (C) A further complication is that the agreement that Imedi had with the government is only oral. All negotiations with the government were couched in the allegorical terms of rugby teams, with the wallabees (NewsCorp and Imedi) and the lellos (the Government of Georgia) agreeing on certain terms and conditions, but even then no final agreement was ever signed after the government learned that NewsCorp did not own any stake in Imedi.

¶4. (C) Imedi has tried to receive compensation from the Ministry of the Interior without success, and has written to President Saakashvili directly. Baratashvili asked the Embassy to raise this issue with the GoG, since the USG played a vital role in the original discussions to reopen Imedi. Even without these funds they may be able to resume broadcasting, but the new owner has been only putting money slowly into Imedi. (Comment: In response, the DCM raised

the issue with the MOIA and was informed that the Prosecutor General's Office is the appropriate point of contact. The PG's Office will provide us with the responsible official and we will pass to Imedi. End comment.)

"NewsCorp looks bad, and it is all because of Imedi"

15. (C) Baratashvili was quite critical of the NewCorp leadership and said that now he can only conclude the worst conspiracy theories for why NewsCorp ever got involved in Imedi in the first place. He pointed out that the entire NewsCorp Europe staff has been demoted or fired, and claimed that the reputation of NewsCorp within the broadcasting world has taken a blow, strictly because of the Imedi situation. He confirmed that NewsCorp never invested in Imedi, and never provided them any real direction or training. Lewis Robertson, the head of NewsCorp Caucasus, was ineffective and unaware of what happened at Imedi. According to Baratashvili NewsCorp functioned largely as a cover for Patarkatsishvili with the government, and he saw no benefit to NewsCorp in the arrangement. He speculated that NewsCorp was acting on Berezovsky's behalf, observing that perhaps the GoG's conspiracy theories were "not really that far off base". Martin Pompadour, the former head of NewsCorp Europe has been demoted to running NewsCorp Russia's radio network and outdoor advertising company (which they reportedly are trying to sell).

"Kay is the owner, that is for sure"

16. (C) When asked about the new owner of Imedi, Amcit businessman Joseph Kay, Baratashvili and Gogichaishvili

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confirmed that he is paying Imedi salaries and has paid off station debts. In their view the lawsuits against Kay by the family of Patarkatsishvili are baseless and "will go nowhere in this country". Kay is largely an absentee owner, but does have a lot of money and is very interested in running Imedi as a profitable business. Baratashvili said that Patarkatsishvili could pour 4 Million dollars a month into Imedi, but Kay won't because he is not interested in building a political empire.

17. (C) On his last trip to the Imedi studios Kay fired the head of top-rated Imedi Radio, which had remained the most opposition friendly national medium during the parliamentary election. Kay appointed the former press spokesman for Davit Tkeshelashvili, the Minister of the Regions, in her stead. In meetings with the radio journalists afterwards Kay and the new Director assured staffers that the editorial line of Imedi Radio will not be changed. Baratashvili observed that things have changed in Georgia, and predicted a sort of "creeping annexation" of Radio Imedi - "just listen in six months and you will mostly just hear music".

"Why should I bother broadcasting news, we are first"

18. (C) Baratashvili shared the latest television ratings for Georgia with the Emboff. Currently Imedi is running a three year old Venezuelan soap opera (Wildcat) in the 9:00 pm prime time slot, against Kurieri, Rustavi 2's news program. Strikingly, in the most recent ratings they are beating Rustavi 2 by more than a two to one margin in viewership. Georgian Public Broadcasting is watched by 6 percent of the viewing audience, and Mze by 2 percent, so even though they are nationwide stations their current viewership is negligible. Baratashvili said that "News production is expensive, and frankly why should I bother?", but the station is firmly committed to broadcasting the news again. They have retained a cadre of news braodcasters and will try to promote from that group rather than hiring new journalists. They do intend to offer shorter newscasts, 45 minutes long, instead of the 100 minute telecasts that are often the norm in Georgia. Gogichaishvili plans to schedule a political talk show in the fall, but one that would only run one time

per week, and on a variety of themes that are not strictly political. They observed that the public seems to be tired of political upheaval, as was reflected in the most recent election results.

"The opposition ended on February 14th"

¶9. (C) In a comment on the Parliamentary elections, and the general state of the opposition in Georgia, Baratashvili gave his opinion that Patarkatsishvili had been financing the opposition and directing their actions. Upon his death the opposition not only lost any financial base, but also lost the only person that seemed aware of how to operate politically in Georgia. "From that point on they were hopeless and lost". Baratashvili is confident that Imedi can survive in Georgia, but only as it understands the new realities. Of the current opposition leaders Giorgi Targamadze alone understands the new situation, according to Baratashvili.

¶10. (C) Comment. Prior to their November 7, 2007 shutdown Imedi television functioned in some ways as the general headquarters of the opposition in Georgia. Imedi gave them ready access to the public, and at times shaped their message. Rustavi 2 and Mze continue to show very strong loyalty towards the government in their editorial line. While it is good that Imedi will resume news broadcasts, it is uncertain whether it will represent an alternate viewpoint. This is unfortunate for the development of democracy in Georgia. One bright spot may be that Georgian Public Broadcasting has made serious steps toward presenting a more balanced view and has opposition representation on their board. Baratashvili observed with somewhat bitter irony that it is very sad when a new group speaking out for journalistic freedom is led by Mamuka Ghlonti - a cable tv producer of music videos - and when Ghlonti publishes protests signed only by a handful of regional print journalists. End Comment.

TEFFT